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Engaging international students in employability activities: an innovative approach

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Pedagogic Research and Teaching Innovation (PRTI) Award

Final Report 2017

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Title of project: Engaging international students in employability activities: an innovative approach

Type of project: Survey

Keywords: International students, employability, social media

Aims of project:

This project aimed to investigate whether it will be effective to adopt social media to disseminate training opportunities and engage international students to develop their employability while they study in the UK. More specifically, three research objectives were:

- to examine international students' opinions on usage of social media to engage them in different employability opportunities;
- to assess the effectiveness of the social media;
- to make recommendations to relevant student services for better engagement of international students.

Background/context to project:

Graduate employability has been widely debated by policy-makers and academics (Pegg et al., 2012). However, Waters (2009) points out that little reference is made in current literature to the increasingly international dimensions of higher education. Huang et al.'s (2014) research into graduate employability and Chinese international students in the UK argues that the students were fully aware of a range of opportunities available to support the development of their employability but their engagement with those opportunities could be better. Many authors recognise the importance of social media in engaging students in learning but few consider graduate employability. Furthermore, anecdotal evidence gathered through our previous research and our roles in supporting international students indicate that social media might address the current gap.

Methods used:

This research adopted a two-stage mixed-method research process. In the first stage, a questionnaire was used to understand international students' views and willingness to engage employability-training opportunities in the university. Their views on usage of social media in engaging them to participate such opportunities were also explored. A focus group discussion was organised as an opportunity to work with the students to develop strategies for engaging students in developing social media content/strategies to engage with career planning. In the second stage, a three-part questionnaire survey was designed based on a detailed literature review (Brooks et al., 2012; Huang et al., 2014; Huang and Turner, 2017; Pegg et al., 2012): it captured demographic information, social media behaviour in relation to the university employability activities, as well as capturing their general social media behaviour (importance and

performance). SPSS was used to analyse collected survey data. Framework analysis was adopted to analyse qualitative data from the focus group discussion.

Results:

For the first survey, drawing on data collected from 221 international students at all levels of study across a range of degree programmes, we considered their engagement with different employability activities (EA), social media behaviours and their intention to use social media to engage with employability activities. It was apparent the students were aware of a range of EAs. However, their awareness was relatively low. Curriculum-embedded EAs vs extra curriculum activities. The students were keen to attend a special employability session for international students. Their main motivation to use social media was socialising, but they were confident and would like to use social media to engage with EAs.

For the second survey, in total 310 questionnaires were returned with 278 completed in full. International students were from 24 countries, studying at four of the five faculties at the University and represented 48 programmes. Some key findings include:

- (i) regarding use of different types of social media platforms, Facebook, Instagram and YouTube were the top three platforms. Although WeChat was just outside the top three platforms, it was the most often used social media site among the international students. This might be because the largest number of international students in the University were Chinese and WeChat was very popular among them.
- (ii) Low numbers of international students were aware of different social media platforms offered by Career & Employability services and their faculties. Furthermore, work opportunities (mean = 4.02) and volunteering opportunities (mean = 4.00) received their highest awareness based on a Likert scale of 7 which 1 means no awareness and 7 means fully aware and attend.
- (iii) The respondents' actual use of social media to engage employability was slightly disappointing as 'I frequently check the information posted by social media sites' (mean = 4.03) and 'I carefully read the information posted by different social media sites.' (mean = 3.91) when we explored to what extent their behaviour was consistent with the statement which 1 meant least consistent and 7 meant most consistent.
- (iv) In terms of the perceived usefulness of the social media platforms from the university, the three highest useful functions perceived by the respondents were, to enhance the interaction with people (mean = 4.71), to know internship opportunities (mean = 4.64), and to know placement opportunities (mean = 4.59).
- (v) Twenty-three attributes were used to gather the respondents' perceived importance when they engage employability opportunities offered by social media platforms and their evaluation of the university's performance. Mean scores for the attributes in importance and performance analyses ranged from 4.33 to 4.95.

In conclusion, although the university made great efforts to use different social media platforms to engage students to develop their employability, the international students' awareness of such platforms was low and their actual use of such platforms was disappointing. The social media platforms were perceived most useful for interaction with people and job/placement opportunities. The importance-performance analysis provided four strategies for the university career & employability services to adopt to better use social media to engage international students to develop their employability.

Associated publications:

Huang, R and Turner, R (2017) Engaging international students to develop their employability: do social media represent an untapped resource? A Paper presented at PedRIO Employability conference, Plymouth, 19 January

Huang, R and Turner, R (2017) Engaging international students to develop their employability through social media: a case study of British University, ICERI2017, 16-18 November, Seville, Spain

Huang, R and Turner, R (in draft) International students, employability and social media: do social media represent an untapped resource? Journal of Vocational Education and Training

Dissemination:

The findings from this research were presented at PedRIO Employability conference 2017 and will be presented at ICERI 2017 in Seville.

Our findings contributed to discussion in different faculty committees (Faculty of Business International Committee, Faculty of Business PGT marketing, recruitment committee) and workshops (e.g. a workshop for PGT programme manager regarding best practice in LinkedIn).